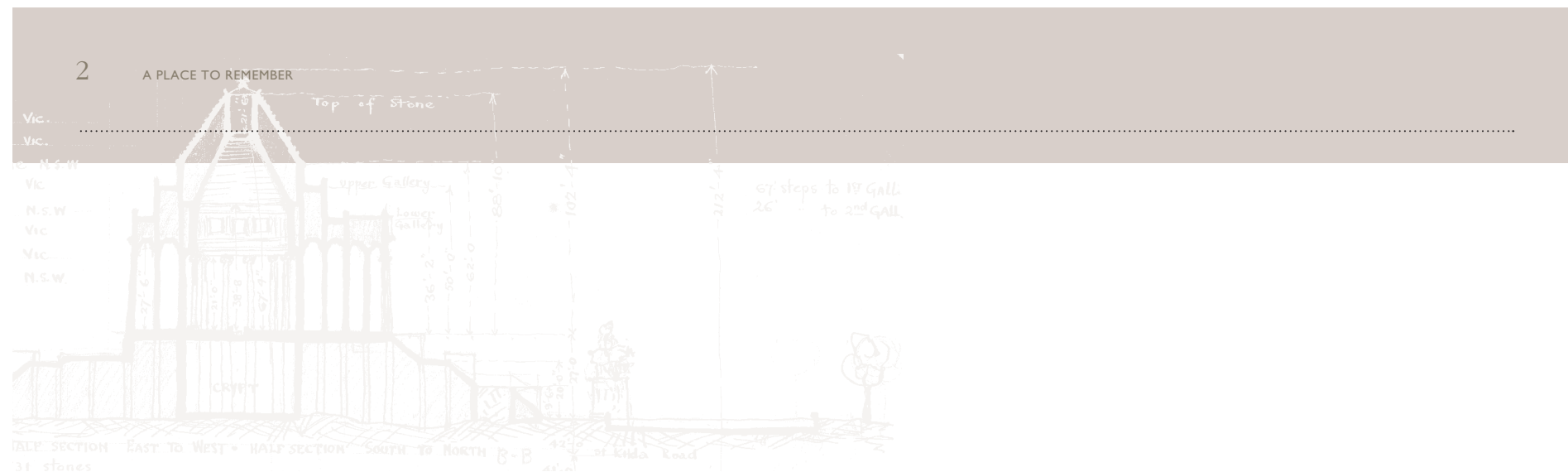




At the centre of almost every Victorian city and town stands a war memorial. Obelisk and arch, broken pillar and stern upright soldier, gateway, hall and avenue of honour, these gestures of remembrance seem to stretch from one end of our state to the other. Most were raised in the 1920s and 1930s, built to commemorate the Great War and marking a sacrifice almost too immense to imagine. Of the 114000 who enlisted in Victoria, 19000 never came home. Thousands more returned wasted by war, gassed or mad, blind or crippled. On every Victorian memorial a tally of names is chiselled in the stone and often a single surname recurs time and again. The little pastoral area of Dunkeld in the state's north-west was typical of many. 'One widow lost 4 sons', the Mayor explained to Victoria's National War Memorial Committee, 'another family lost 3. Two other families lost 2 sons each. Of 131 enlistments 31 men will never return,' Dunkeld placed its memorial at the foot of the Grampians. A stone soldier, arms reversed, guards the memory of sons and brothers, squatters and selectors, neighbours, workmates, friends. Nor did the grieving end with the Great War. At Dunkeld as elsewhere a second generation of names files down from the first: the war that was to end all wars is flanked by fatalities of 'subsequent conflicts'. Most memorials (Dunkeld's included) are hedged by rows of rosemary and many bear the remains of wreaths, flags or tiny paper crosses, bearing witness that we still remember today.

No two of these memorials are ever quite alike; as communities struggled to come to terms with the enormity of their loss, the ways they chose to honour their dead were many and complex. Like most objects of material culture, war memorials 'possess biographies whose social and cultural resonances are multi-layered and multi-vocal'. Once taken for granted they are now the subject of robust scholarship. War memorials were built at the busy intersection of private and collective memory: historians quarrel interminably over their meaning and use.² However, there is one theme that all these monuments have in common. The Australian (and imperial) policy not to repatriate the war dead made each such monument a surrogate grave, an empty tomb for 'boys' who would never march home, a 'site of memory', a shrine of remembrance.³

Victoria's Shrine of Remembrance was the last state memorial raised in Australia. It was also the grandest. At the laying of the foundation stone in 1927 Australia's greatest wartime leader, General Sir John Monash, reckoned the Shrine would occupy a major city block and comfortably swallow up the Melbourne Cricket Ground. These were measures immediately intelligible to Melburnians. As the great stone structure rose above the chessboard streets of the city, the Shrine could claim to be the largest granite building in the world. Over 30 metres high and 123 metres square, sited to be seen from the suburbs and Port Phillip Bay, it was believed by many to be the world's most impressive war memorial. Many believe this still.



The Dedication

The building was dedicated on 11 November 1934 and the ceremony that morning was almost as momentous as the monument itself. Over 300 000 people gathered around the Domain, an assembly equal to almost half the population of Melbourne and at that time the largest crowd ever seen in Australia. They came from every corner of city and suburb; from the flat basalt plains of the industrial west to the handsome tree-lined avenues of the east. For all the proud citizens of Victoria the opening of the Shrine was the highlight of the state's centenary celebrations. It was an event not to be missed.

'The ceremony', the *London Times* reported, 'took place under heavy dark clouds with occasional bursts of sunshine'. And not for the last time in its history Melbourne's ever-changing weather proved a spectacle in itself:

Sunshine fought with clouds, making a beautiful silver grey setting for the stark grey mass of the Shrine . . . The great dominating stone memorial seemed to possess magnetic properties [as] it drew almost a whole city to its base.⁴

Most gathered around the southern approach of the building, for it was there on the seaward-facing steps of the Shrine that much of the ceremony would take place. However, as the morning progressed every corner of the Domain grew 'dense' with people and spectators jostled for position as far afield as St Kilda Road itself. Fully-grown men followed the lead of schoolboys and

'sought points of vantage in St Kilda Road's stoutest trees'. The most enterprising dangled swings from the arching branches of the city's proudest boulevard and (to the envy of many a footsore bystander) settled in for the day. All awaited the arrival of the King's son, Prince Henry, the Duke of Gloucester and himself a soldier. Henry had sailed from England on the warship HMS *Sussex*, bearing a message of 'grateful memory' and a poppy-lined wreath chosen by his father. It formed part of a complex web of imperial associations captured in relic, artefact and verse: a Book of Remembrance signed by the Sovereign, the Union flag that was draped over London's Cenotaph in Whitehall, a poem by Rudyard Kipling. The Shrine was yet another link in 'the cultural federation of Empire', a statement in stone of a British Australia.⁵

In an age of minimal amplification, ceremony and spectacle were set to the sounds of brass bands, trumpets, bugles and gunfire. They synchronised an elaborate movement through time, light and space. The event began with a march by returned soldiers, 'an army of mufti' striding 60 abreast up St Kilda Road.

At a given signal the men, 27 500 strong, began to converge on the southern slopes led by officers in uniform. They wheeled around in a phalanx and, in wave after wave, ascended the green slopes.⁶

As they took up their positions, a 'haze of tobacco smoke from scores of thousands of pipes and cigarettes' enveloped the men all but entirely. A 'fog of smoke' merged with Melbourne's skyline to drape the Shrine in mist. Then (with a well-timed splash of sunshine) Prince Henry's arrival brought 'the glitter of arms' to this

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'Jostling for position'

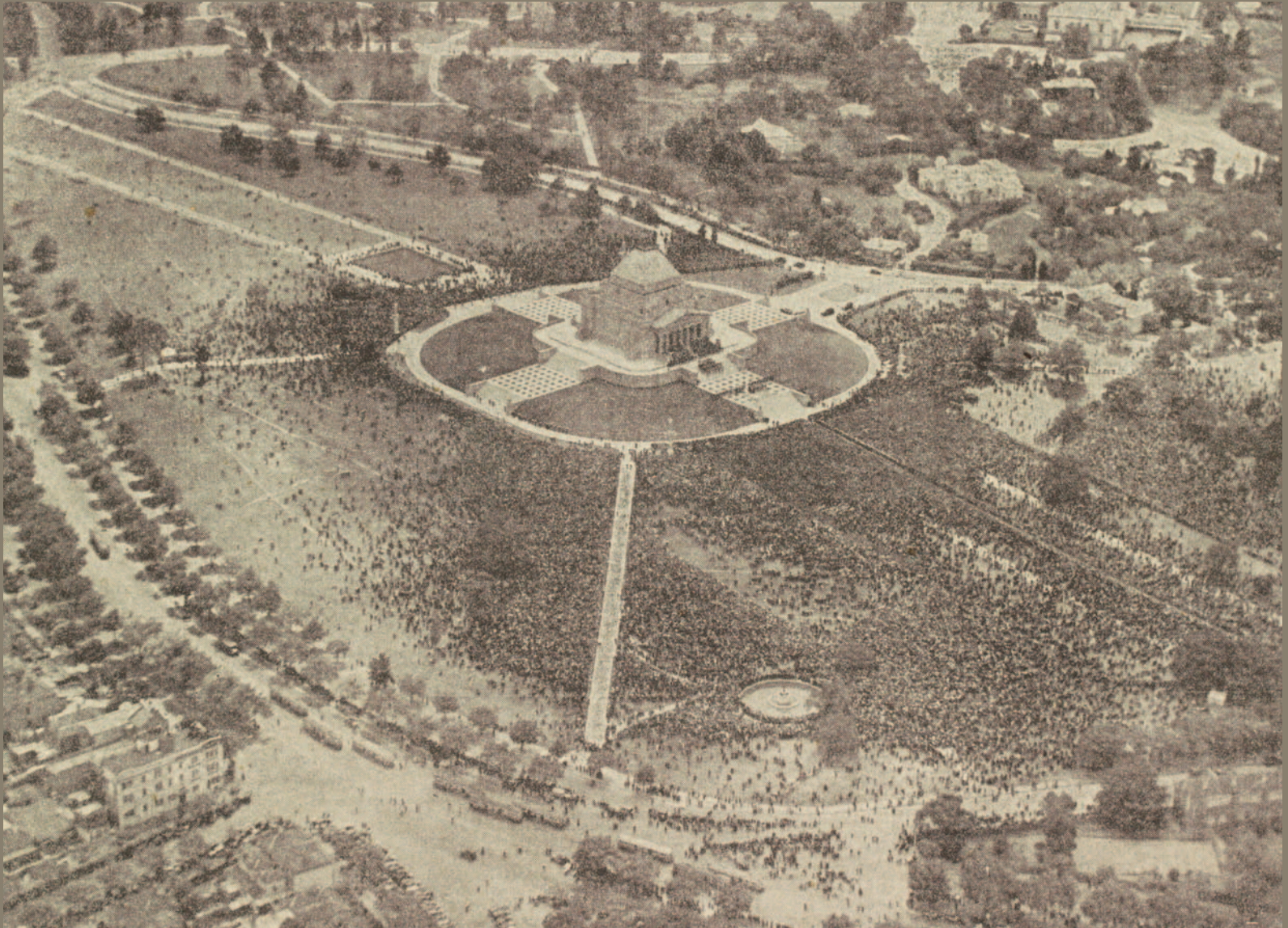
Left: Crowds assemble in the Domain for the Dedication. This photograph from a private collection shows the competition for space and view alike. As a memento of the day, it is in many ways revealing. Note the formal attire of ladies and gentlemen alike and the hats of boy scouts and schoolgirls. Like many Victorians, this photographer travelled across the state to witness and record the Dedication service. It took Ian Fleming six hours to ride his motorbike from Yarram to Melbourne. He was conscious that history was about to be made.

Source: Courtesy of Margaret Fleming

Above: Footsore spectators at the end of the ceremony.

Source: Alan Elliott Collection, H84.451, courtesy of State Library of Victoria

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'A great sea of people edged with Khaki'

An aerial view of the Dedication ceremony on Armistice Day 1934. This great event coincided with the centenary of the city of Melbourne. From the moment of its inception the memorial's history has been inseparably entwined with that of the city. Note the sparsely treed spaces of the Domain and the undeveloped boulevard of St Kilda Road.

Source: 'Victoria's Great Shrine of Remembrance', *Age*, 12 November 1934, courtesy of Newspapers Collection, State Library of Victoria

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A wreath to the memory of the late Corporal J. D. Burns was laid at the Shrine today by his mother. On the card was written, "They fought and died for England, and gladly went their way —." This is the second last line of the poem, "For England," which he wrote.

"The absent present again"

Mrs Burns climbs steep steps to lay a floral tribute to her son. The boy beside her reminds us of the generations of the bereaved. Mrs Burns found comfort in her son's patriotic poetry, mingling (as the Shrine still does today) pride with grief.

Source: *Herald*, 13 November 1934, courtesy of Newspapers Collection, State Library of Victoria

masses of wreaths . . . and to place floral tributes of their own to relatives and loved ones'. Within an hour the marble ledges of the inner Sanctuary were 'completely covered' with flowers. Many paid tribute to 'Our Glorious Dead', but most bore a single name.¹⁰

Reading the offerings left at the Shrine is no easy task for historians. In her analysis of similar unveiling ceremonies in Britain, Catherine Moriarty has argued that memorials are 'composite sites' melding 'private and public memories'. 'Public remembrance was dependent on private memory', she notes, but commemoration sought 'a single stabilised narrative'; it promised consolation to those who lost their loved ones and 'unified the national memory of war'. We see that process at work in the first offerings made that first day at the Shrine. The most elaborate tributes were statements of martial valour and imperial loyalty: 'a red, white and blue anchor presented by the men of HMS Sussex' from Scotland, 'a wreath made of wildflowers and heather' from England, an 'artistic [arrangement] of white lilies, roses, carnations and maidenhair fern'. In a society still riven by sectarianism, there was no mention of a wreath from Ireland. Like most of the ceremonies marking Victoria's memorials, this was a tacitly Protestant occasion. Inscriptions accompanying the wreaths affirmed Australia's place in Empire and the justice of the imperial cause. The flower of Australian youth had given their lives for 'King', 'Empire', 'Freedom' and 'England'. 'They fought and died for England', a wreath for the soldier poet JD Burns declared, 'and gladly went their way'. Corporal Burns had died at the Gallipoli landing, an event often associated with the founding of a new nation: the offering made by his mother that day affirmed

a much older loyalty. Over a third of Victoria's casualties had been born in Britain. The 'Bugles of England' had called them to war.¹¹

Protestations of loyalty to King and Country were the stuff of newspaper editorials. They sometimes eased, as Mrs Burns' gesture suggests, the trauma of a generation's loss. Even so we should be wary of seeing the Shrine, and thousands of memorials like it, as no more than 'political totems'. As the muffled sobbing in the crowd suggests, private memories 'meshed' and sometimes grated with these public narratives of war.

They were built [Jay Winter observes] as places where people could mourn. And be seen to mourn. Their ritual significance has frequently been obscured by their political symbolism, which now that the moment of mourning has long passed, is all that we can see. At the time communal commemorative art provided, first and foremost, a framework for and legitimation of individual and family grief.¹²

The building and dedication of these war memorials became in effect a 'substitute' for burying our dead. It made, in Etlin's memorable phrase, the absent present again.¹³

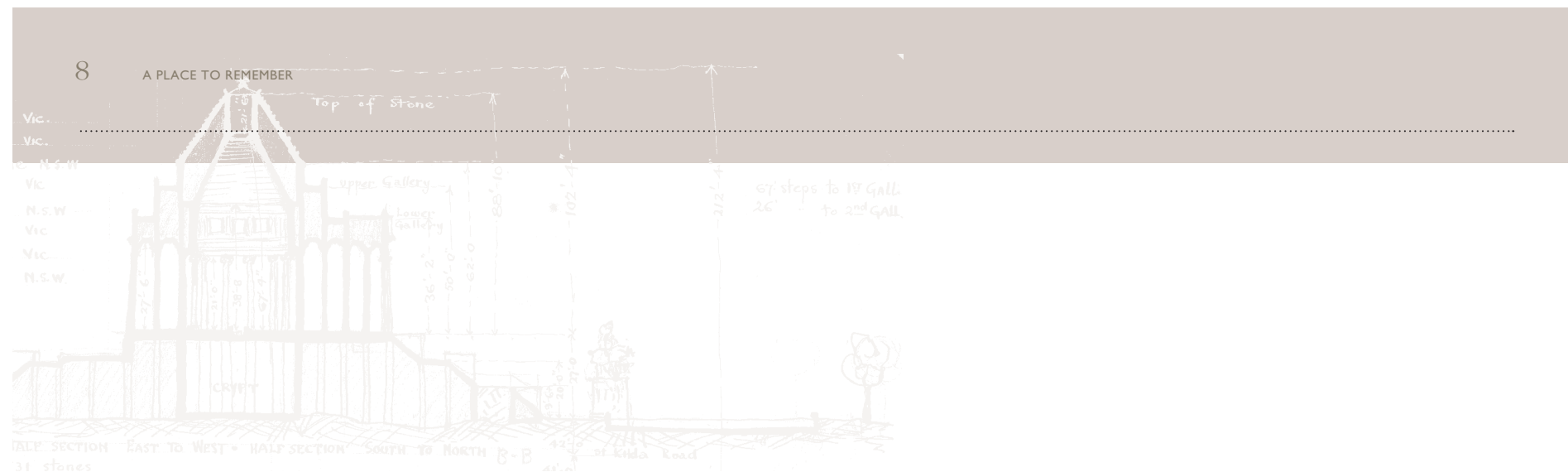
On the one hand, the Dedication ceremony of 1934 was carefully orchestrated. There was nothing accidental in the ranked formations of dignitaries or the sequenced pattern of proceedings; some claim it took 144 pages of mathematical calculations to direct a ray of sunlight to that precise place at that precise time. On the other, the best-planned events were open to interpretation, irony, even accident. Even before its Dedication, the Shrine became 'an active site of memory'. Those who made

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that first faltering pilgrimage experienced its spaces in different, even contradictory, ways.¹⁴

Though this was hailed as a day for all Victorians, the Shrine's Dedication ceremony highlighted the differences that divided inter-war Australia, the gap between soldier and civilian, loyalist and pacifist, women and men. Most of these divisions dated to the war years themselves; indeed the largest single gathering of Melburnians prior to the Shrine's unveiling was a 'Win the War' rally held in 1917. Then over 100 000 had packed the Melbourne Cricket Ground to hear Billy Hughes bellow in favour of conscription. Many who gathered on the Domain that day had attended that same meeting, their belief in the Empire and contempt for the 'shirker' as strong in peace as it had been in war. Alongside them stood those who had joined the Women's Peace Army, voted No in two bitterly contested plebiscites, opposed what they saw as the rise of Australian militarism and fought in the Great Strike of 1917. The Shrine was a memorial built by a still divided society – 'slave built' some claimed – by an army of unemployed who terraced its grounds. Arguably it opened as many wounds as it healed.¹⁵

One of these divisions related to gender and culturally binding definitions of masculine and feminine roles. Though often charged with the labour of grieving, women appeared for the most part as spectators, disenfranchised (throughout the official ceremony at least) from the 'active expression' of grief. The wailing of women threatened to unhinge the dignity of proceedings; it breached the sanctity of the Armistice silence and was tolerated but certainly not condoned on the day. Space reinforced inequalities of gender. Stiff uniformed male figures lined the passages to the Shrine's inner sanctum; women

assembled on grassed slopes below the memorial, a great sea of mourning black visibly shaking with grief. Most could neither hear nor see the spectacle staged above them, though an enterprising few raised mirrors on their umbrellas, turned their backs to the Shrine and took in what they could. Only one woman joined the official cortege as it wove its way through the Shrine's memorial spaces. Matron Grace Wilson was dressed in the grey uniform of the Australian Army Nursing Service, her military status at best ambiguous, her presence a token of her sex. Only when the ceremony was over was the Shrine opened to what one account called an 'influx' of women. Policing its male sanctuaries would prove in its history an ongoing theme.¹⁶

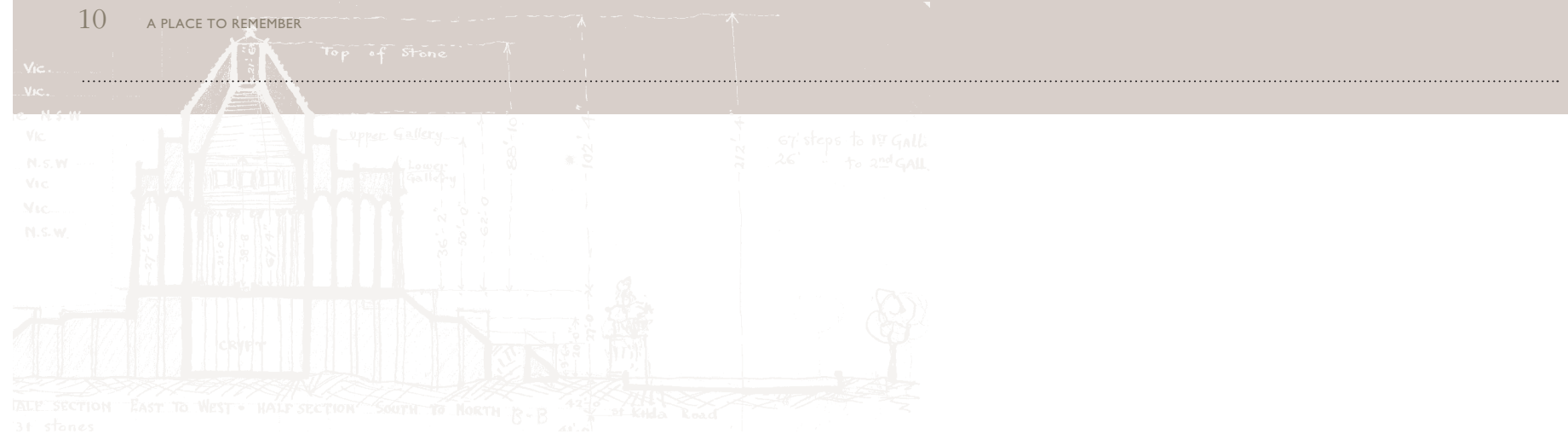
Commemoration offered no space at all for dissenters. Not far from parading soldiers a party of pacifists distributed leaflets advocating disarmament. They were promptly 'moved on' by police and literature 'illegally portraying a likeness of the Shrine' was impounded. We do not know if the Victorian Council Against War succeeded in laying a wreath on the Day of Dedication. Earlier wreaths – to 'the brave men' of all armies 'slaughtered by war' – were carried away by officials, stripped bare of what the *Argus* called 'Discordant Sentiment' and buried beneath masses of flowers. To some voices on the left of Labor politics, doves released from the Shrine's balcony were no more than an empty gesture. Shouting anti-war slogans, Harold Fletcher was dragged away by police and jailed for 'offensive behaviour'. A former soldier, Fletcher attended the ceremony 'out of respect for his [dead] comrades', refused to pay a £5 fine and was sent to prison for 21 days.¹⁷ It was not the last time old diggers would rail against war or dissenters flaunt their alternative memorials. The Shrine was already a place of protest as well as remembrance.¹⁸

Most opponents of the Shrine marked Dedication Day by their absence. At the opposite end of Melbourne, hundreds attended a World Congress against War and Fascism hosted by the Trades Hall. The guest of honour was to have been Egon Kisch, a Czech journalist, agent of the Comintern and, with his imprisonment under the Immigration Act, a celebrity of the Left. Kisch was something of a linguist, which fact obliged immigration authorities to administer his dictation test in Scottish Gaelic. Fellow delegates demanded Kisch's release, condemned 'the jingoistic spirit created by the Duke of Gloucester's visit' and damned that 'temple to Mars' built 'to keep the war spirit alive'.¹⁹ Many continued the call for a more practical memorial, a hospital to heal the 'war damaged', better pensions, full employment, facilities for the crippled and blind. Anything but 'that stack of stones on St Kilda Road', 'an emblem of the greatest tragedy the world has ever known'.²⁰ However, the world would soon witness an even greater tragedy. And many of the men and women who spoke out against militarism would themselves march to war.

Finally, 11 November 1934 was more a day for soldiers than civilians. Technically, of course, the Shrine was built to acknowledge the sacrifice of all Victorians, war workers as much as warriors: those who lost sons, brothers and husbands as much as the men themselves. Many of Australia's memorials had been unveiled by non-combatants: stalwart citizens who had raised much of the money to build them or grieving mothers who had sent their flesh and blood to war. And in a few remarkable cases these ceremonies actively disputed the necessity of war. Dunkeld's Mayor had hoped General Monash would open their memorial. They ended up with William Slater MLC, a socialist

and pacifist who had served as a stretcher-bearer in Belgium and France, where he had been gassed and wounded. Slater condemned the conflict as the 'inevitable outcome of capitalist imperialism' and his diaries are a graphic account of the 'hellishness of war'.²¹ No such sentiments were heard at the Dedication of the Shrine. This was very much an AIF memorial and valorising military service was the order of the day. A soldier dedicated the state's memorial, military men dominated proceedings and VC winners were proudly displayed. Returned men were marshalled along city streets as if they were parade grounds. No one noticed the army of voluntary workers that had kept them clothed and fed. Special provision was made for crippled men and cot cases wheeled in from the Caulfield Repatriation Hospital. There was no such acknowledgement of hundreds of munitions workers, most of them women, who were also maimed, poisoned and blinded by war.²² Witnesses to the event remember 'lots of marching men', massed bands, the flash of bayonets in the sun, martial spectacle galore. Only later did they 'come to appreciate all the Shrine stands for'.²³

Commemoration, then, could also be an act of exclusion. It alienated many whom it strove to reach. Despite concession fares, some old Anzacs lacked the funds to make their way to Melbourne. The ill and infirm pleaded for seating. 'A Returned Soldier's Father' well into his seventies asked for a simple handrail to steady his step. Hundreds of pounds were spent on 'a pot-pourri of hymns and march tunes' but an offer by 'thousands of trained choirists' for accompaniment was rudely 'snubbed'. Melburnians, Premier Stanley Argyle declared, would not mark *their* memorial with a 'musical festival', the sort of thing they did



in Sydney. The prayers read by Protestant clergy gave little solace to Catholic families; many were troubled by the Shrine's 'pagan appearance' or its allegedly Masonic symbolism; virulently anti-Labor politicians (Argyle chief among them) paid no tribute to men on 'susso' who had moved tons of rubble and earth. The western wall of the building let all who were present know that they stood on Holy Ground. Despite the unearthing of ancient bones in the building works, and 'homified' speculation that this might be 'an Aboriginal burial ground', this was not a generation that acknowledged the traditional owners of the land.²⁴

The great day itself did not pass without accident. At Kipling's insistence his 'lofty ode' to the Shrine remained unread until the close of the Dedication ceremony. The final lines implied that the Ray of Light fell on the Rock of Remembrance on Anzac Day. It was a mistake later generations would probably have forgiven, but the Premier had the verse hastily altered before it was cast forever in bronze.²⁵ Finally, there was a fear that not all Melburnians approached the Shrine in the manner its builders intended. 'A Bereaved Mother' complained of crowds of men, women and children 'invading the hallowed walls' at a ceremonial tree planting prior to the Dedication.

Most men kept their hats on, and some were smoking cigarettes or pipes. Children rushed up and down the steps as if at a show or exhibition, to see all that could be seen. No attempt was made by their parents to quieten them. Just noise, chatter and clatter. No solemnity, no reverence, no stillness, even around the stone of remembrance . . . How it hurts those of us who have lost their loved ones.²⁶

Victorians had built a memorial for future generations to marvel at. And therein lay a problem.

Do people who visit this Shrine go there to pay their respects to those who have paid the supreme sacrifice, or do they go there to obtain a panoramic view of the City of Melbourne?²⁷

At that solemn ceremony to honour Victoria's dead, a party of 'unauthorised souvenir vendors' made a killing selling 'buttons' of the Shrine.²⁸ A degree of tension between the Shrine's secular amenity and its spiritual mission was already apparent.

Visualising the lost

Reconstructing that first visit to the Shrine poses many challenges. We are aided by a special commemorative booklet issued for the day. By any standard, Ambrose Pratt's *Interpretive Appreciation of the Shrine of Remembrance* is a lavish publication, adorned by handsome photographs, a series of pen-and-ink sketches and a narrative almost as visual. Pratt was a journalist employed on the *Age*, the author of lamikin novels and once a vocal advocate of the Left. By the mid 1920s, his writing and his politics had taken a more conservative turn and that would help to explain the ardent patriotism of the text. Politics aside, Pratt's evocative imagery and his penchant for spiritualism help us to imagine a world we have lost. In 1934 the Shrine sat sharp and raw and new on Melbourne's skyline, fresh-cut blocks of steel grey granite and marble belying the ancient form of its design. The trees that frame the building